

Pittsburgh Catholics Take the Pledge, 1851

By Mike Aquilina

In the beginning — more than a century before AA — was The Pledge. And The Pledge was between the problem drinker and God.

In the early 19th century, a temperance wave swept the United States, and millions swore off alcohol by reciting one of several popular temperance oaths and going cold turkey. The act was known, colloquially, as "Taking The Pledge."

The Pledge arose out of a movement originally secular. In the late 1700s, Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia wrote pamphlets discouraging the consumption of "ardent spirits." Protestant ministers such as Lyman Beecher baptized these efforts. Though the crusade became something of a fad, it failed to arouse widespread interest among Catholics, who were perhaps suspicious of its Protestant associations. One exception was the Irish Temperance Society, which arose in Boston in 1835 and was open to both Catholics and Protestants.

The movement spread from the States to the British Isles, and was there received into full communion with the Church, thanks to the work of a Capuchin priest named Theobald Mathew from Thomastown Castle, Ireland.

Father Mathew set himself apart from his Protestant forebears by the moderation of his preaching. He believed little could be gained by whipping a crowd into frenzy with hellfire preaching, then calling them forward *en masse* to sign The Pledge. He taught, instead, that sobriety must be an individual decision made "in cold blood."

Father Mathew began his crusade in 1838, three years before ordination, when he himself (never a problem drinker) signed a total-abstinence pledge. He saw all

around him an Irish people degraded by oppressive British rule, turning in despair to liquor. The results: economic depression, personal ruin, increasing crime and the breakdown of the family.

His preaching in Ireland was phenomenally successful. All along the island, liquor revenues plummeted to half of the country's pre-Pledge levels. Historians report that, in short order, nearly half of the country's adult population came to sign Father Mathew's Pledge. Children did, too, encouraged to swear off the stuff before they had the chance to be seduced by it. Confirmation classes would sometimes take a temporary vow, which could later be renewed for life.

As more Irish left the Isle for refuge in the States, they took their Pledge with them. Catholic temperance societies soon emerged here, encouraged by a largely immigrant Irish hierarchy. As early as 1840, Bishop Patrick Kinrick of Philadelphia was promoting total abstinence among his flock. In 1845, Pittsburgh's zealously teetotaling bishop, Michael O'Connor, sailed home to Ireland so that he could meet with Father Mathew. Bishop O'Connor, speaking for many other U.S. prelates, begged Father Mathew to come to America.

But Father had work enough in Ireland, and was not able to cross the Atlantic until 1849. By then his celebrity was such that he was met by crowds wherever he went. Till 1851 he barnstormed from city to city, through 25 states. President Zachary Taylor received him at the White House. Half a million people signed the Pledge during the tour.

Eight thousand signed on in Pittsburgh alone, when the "Venerable Apostle of Temperance" visited in 1851. Each one signed individually, emphasized the *Pittsburgh Catholic* newspaper.

"There has been no excitement, no public meeting in which hundreds have signed, in a moment of enthusiasm. Those who have taken the Pledge from Father Mathew here have visited him, one by one, in a private house, and have been urged to the course by no solicitations other than those of their personal friends." This was striking to the newspaper's reporter, who recalled how, 10 years before, the temperance fad had swept the region with fiery preaching and large rallies, but "how few have adhered to the resolutions which they made." Father Mathew, on the other hand, estimated, then, that 96 percent of those to whom he administered The Pledge stayed dry.

Bishop O'Connor himself publicly took The Pledge in St. Paul's Cathedral, with the members of the Brotherhood of St. Joseph, a local temperance society. The president of the society thanked Father Mathew, noting that his Pledge had become, for many Irish immigrants to America, "their passport to credit and honor, peace, happiness and support, and, to many, wealth and renown . . . The drunkard has now become a sober, honest, virtuous, industrious and respectable citizen."

Pittsburghers detained the priest as long as they could, and on the day of his departure a throng followed him "even to the boat." The *Pittsburgh Catholic* concluded: "Could he have prolonged his visit for another week, we do not doubt that he would have doubled the number of his disciples in this place."

Father Mathew returned to Ireland shortly after his stay in Pittsburgh. But the years that followed hardly matched his earlier successes. The land had been devastated by the Potato Famine (1845-47), and the people spiraled into further depression. Many of the best and brightest left for America. Many others, feeling bereft, began to break The Pledge. The priest,

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already in ailing health after a succession of strokes, spent his last years serving the poor. He died in 1856, and his apostolate, for the most part, was buried with him.

The Pledge received new vigor, however, in 1898 with the founding of the Pioneer Association in Dublin. The Association thrives today in Pittsburgh, promoting total abstinence and Irish culture.

•(For information on the Pioneers, call Kevin McGinty: 216-486-8279.)



History of Schools

Society member Father Joseph Linck, C.O., will address "Catholic Schools and American Culture: Lessons from History," at the Total Catholic Education Conference, Downtown, Nov. 6. For information, call 412-456-3100.

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Fr. Edward Bryce Gives 1998 Lambing Lecture

On April 9, Father Edward Bryce gave the society's annual Lambing Lecture, speaking on "The Church Responding to Roe v. Wade through Twenty-Five Years." Father Bryce is a veteran of the movement, having served as director of the U.S. bishops' pro-life activities in Washington, D.C. He is now pastor of St. Bede Parish, Point Breeze. He is shown above with diocesan archivist Ken White (*left*), who organized an exhibit on the local Church's pro-life activities, and Father James Garvey (*right*), president of the Catholic Historical society.

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